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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000693

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: THE RISE OF A NEW CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT?

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a June 22 meeting with the Ambassador, March 14 MP Michel Pharaon said Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea was pressuring March 14's independent Christians to join his voting bloc in parliament. Pharaon noted that many independent Christians opposed Geagea and were looking for an alternative. He suggested that an independent bloc of March 14 Christians, loyal to the President, be created. A similar suggestion was given to the Ambassador in a recent meeting with Ghattas Khoury, former senior advisor to Saad Hariri (and failed MP candidate). Regarding the creation of a new cabinet, Pharaon said the issue of the blocking third would be the biggest hurdle for cabinet formation. In a June 23 conference attended by the Ambassador, caretaker Minister of Interior Ziad Baroud predicted that, if all goes well cabinet formation should be completed within 30 to 45 days. End Summary.

GEAGEA WANTS MARCH 14
INDEPENDENTS TO JOIN HIM

2. (C) Greek Orthodox independent MP Michel Pharaon, the most prominent MP from Beirut's First District, briefed the Ambassador and PolOff on June 22 about his recent two hour meeting with Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea. Geagea told Pharaon that he wanted Beirut I's MPs (all Christians) to form a voting bloc with his group. Geagea also wanted three of Zahle's Christian MPs to join his bloc, and Geagea was planning to meet with them soon to discuss the issue. Pharaon, however, felt Geagea would not be pleased with the Zahle group's response.

3. (C) According to Pharaon, constituents in Beirut I would not support their MPs being aligned with Geagea in a political bloc. He told Geagea that he wanted to wait a month before announcing the Beirut group's intentions as to which bloc the group would join. (Note: Pharaon hinted that the request for a month waiting period is only a stalling method to buy time to halt Geagea's continued pressure on the Beirut I deputies. The MPs have no intentions of joining Geagea, he said. If they refused Geagea out right, Geagea

could make the MPs' lives difficult, Pharaon said. End Note.) He also mentioned to Geagea that there were no political differences between them and tried to placate him by suggesting that Geagea could chair quarterly meetings of March 14's Christians.

NEW INDEPENDENT
CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT?

14. (C) According to Pharaon, many independent Christians do not support LF or former President Amine Gemayel's Kataeb Party. These independents are also averse to supporting opposition-Christian leader Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) because of Aoun's alliance with Hizballah. Therefore, Pharaon suggested that March 14's independent Christians form a bloc loyal to the President. This independent bloc could also serve as a bridge between Christians aligned with Geagea and Gemayel, and those aligned with Aoun, to help solve Lebanon's many economic and security related issues. Such a bloc would not rival March 14's other Christian parties, namely LF, but would strengthen the overall March 14 coalition because the independent-Christian bloc would compliment LF's more conservative Christian MPs.

15. (C) In a June 17 meeting with the Ambassador, Ghattas Khoury, the former senior advisor to Saad Hariri, and failed MP candidate, also talked about a new Christian "movement" of persons supportive of March 14 principles but averse to joining Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces. He mentioned

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Minister of State Nassib Lahoud, March 14 Secretary General Fares Souaid, MP Boutros Harb and himself as the type who might be attracted to it. Khoury inquired whether or not the United States would support such an idea. Khoury also noted that Geagea is attempting to increase his Christian bloc by wooing new Zahle MPs, March 14 Armenians, and others.

WAITING FOR SAAD'S RETURN

16. (C) Pharaon said he talked with Future Party leader, MP Saad Hariri, about the possibility of Beirut I's MPs joining a bloc. He reported that Hariri told him to wait until his return before making any decision, as he wanted to consult on the matter. Pharaon added that he supports the creation of an independent Christian bloc within March 14's overall coalition, close to President Sleiman and Christian religious figures. He also said that March 14's 60-70 members should vote as one, to elect MP Saad Hariri as Prime Minister. The optics of 60 to 70 MPs voting for Hariri early on would do a lot to strengthen March 14's image as a unified coalition, Pharaon said.

BLOCKING THIRD WOULD BE
A DETRIMENT TO THE NEW GOL

17. (C) Pharaon said Aoun and opposition leader MP Suleiman Franjeh (Marada Party) want the new March 14-majority government to fail. This is why the majority cannot give the opposition a blocking-third, he added. The 2008 Doha Agreement should not apply to the soon to be formed government, according to Pharaon. He also noted that by giving Aoun and the opposition the ability to block legislation, it takes power away from President Sleiman, as this would give Aoun the ability to block President Sleiman's agenda and reforms Sleiman supports.

18. (C) In a June 23 media interview, Pharaon said, "The Lebanese will know the identity of those who are cooperating to implement the constitution, ensure stability and facilitate the work of President Michel Sleiman as well as those who are obstructing the state institutions' work during

the cabinet formation." He added that, "Lebanon still needs international support on the security and political levels from Arab nations, the EU and the United States in order to secure stability."

NEW GOL PRIORITIES

¶9. (C) Lebanon needs security and stability for awhile, according to Pharaon. A period of time when Lebanon is not in the "eye of the storm" is needed, he added. The priorities for the new government should include dealing with economic matters, such as passing the 2010 budget, and passing certain legislation related to Paris III reforms. As it relates to political matters, border security, and dealing with the Palestinian military bases would be also be important issues for the new parliament to tackle. However, he worried that recent remarks made by Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu suggesting Palestinian refugees should return to somewhere other than Israel would be detrimental for Lebanon's future stability. (Note: Lebanon has 12 Palestinian refugee camps and the Government of Lebanon adamantly opposes permanent resettlement in Lebanon. End Note.)

¶10. (C) In a separate June 23 meeting attended by the Ambassador, caretaker Minister of Interior Ziad Baroud predicted that the next cabinet would be a participatory one that "includes everyone." He added that the Ministerial Statement will most likely be the same as the 2008 statement, with a few additions. He also expected cabinet formation to be completed within 30 to 45 days.

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